Greek Myth and the Relict Hominoid Hypothesis: Satyrs and Neanderthals

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Abstract[1]

In 1982 Myra Shackley published "The Case for Neanderthal Survival: Fact, Fiction or Fraction?" in the journal *Antiquity*, followed by a book the next year *Still Living? Yeti, Sasquatch and the Neanderthal Enigma*. While focusing on recent alleged sightings of the almas (a hairy human-like creature) across Central Asia as a possible relict population of Neanderthals surviving in remote mountainous areas, she also discussed Boris Porshnev's (1968) theory that there might have been Neanderthal survival in other parts of the world such as forests and mountains in Greece, furthermore that satyrs in Greek myth, rather than being imaginary creatures, were based on sightings of relict Neanderthals, albeit distorted, as stories about them were retold. This paper examines evidence for the satyr-Neanderthal relict hominoid hypothesis (based on classical artwork and ancient literary descriptions of satyrs) concluding like Shackley did, Porshnev's theory "deserves serious consideration".

Introduction

There is scientific consensus only one extant human (*Homo*) species or subspecies lives today (*Homo sapiens* or *Homo sapiens sapiens*[2]) but multiple species/subspecies[3] are widely thought to have coexisted throughout the Plio-Pleistocene (~5,300,000 to ~12,000 years ago); estimates range from 4 to 23 (Curnoe and Thorne, 2003). One of these, *Homo neanderthalensis* (or *Homo*

[1] The abstract has been slightly revised since accepted.

[2] Hereinafter *H. s. s.*

[3] Whether fossil hominoids are classifiable as species is disputable because it is not possible to test reproductive isolation with just bones. Some paleoanthropologists therefore only recognise a low number of paleo-species and view fossil hominoids mostly in terms of paleo-subspecies: "morphologically diagnosable yet not reproductively isolated populations" (Wolpoff and Caspari, 2013: 329). This paper favours taxonomic status of Neanderthals as a subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, *H. n. s.* and living humans, *H. s. s* (intraspecific variation rather than two species).

sapiens neanderthalensis) is presumed by nearly all paleoanthropologists to have gone extinct 40,000 years ago (Higham *et al*. 2014; Hublin, 2017) although at Gorham's Cave, Gibraltar it has been argued an isolated group of Neanderthals survived in a refugium more recent (~30,000 cal. BP), despite radiocarbon dating at this site remains contentious (Zilhão and Pettitt, 2006).

The consensus only one human species or subspecies survives today was first challenged by a group of Russian scientists, in the 1960s, who argued for the survival of "relict hominoids"[4] (such as Neanderthals) into recorded human history, covering the past 5000 years (Porshnev, 1963, 1968 [2017], 1969 [1974]). There are no known physical specimens of relict hominoids from this time period, however, the relict hominoid hypothesis primarily relies on other types of evidence: folklore (such as myths and legends), depictions of so-called wild men in medieval art, alleged modern sightings of hairy manlike beings and unidentified animal tracks (Bayanov and Bourtsev, 1974: 454; Bayanov, 2012: 24-25, 2019). These less reliable types of evidence convince few scientists to entertain the possibility (let alone high probability) relict hominoids survived during ancient history into the modern era; hominology arguably is a pseudoscience.[5]

In 1972, the Russian historian Boris Porshnev (the founder of hominology) who had coined the term "relict hominoid" (Porshnev, 1963: 273), died unexpectedly. Two years later, one of his papers (Porshnev, 1969) was translated in the respected American academic journal *Current Anthropology* (Porshnev, 1974). This was the first time that hominology was introduced to US anthropologists, although the Canadian journalist John Green, a few years earlier, published a translation of another Porshnev article in his book *Year of the Sasquatch*, selling thousands of

[4] The word hominoid means "manlike" or "human-like" (from *homin*, man; *oid*, resembling, like). Hominologists tend to revise the taxonomic family Hominidae to exclude pongoids (apelike animals i.e. chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans) and subsume the latter into the family Pongidae, thus according to Porshnev (1974: 449): "it is advisable to abandon the current practise of including all bipedal higher primate fossils in the Hominidae".

[5] Bayanov (2019: 40-41) notes four Russian zoologists in 1969 published a paper dismissing Porshnev's ideas as pseudoscience; for a recent discussion of hominology as pseudoscience, see Roeder and Afinogenov (2018: 243).

copies (Green, 1970: 35-43).[6] Porshnev's paper "The Troglodytidae and the Hominidae in the Taxonomy and Evolution of Higher Primates" (reprinted in *Current Anthropology*) received unfavourable comments by those who responded excluding Gordon Strasenburgh.[7] Since Boris Porshnev had passed away, his Russian colleagues, Dimitri Bayanov and Igor Bourtsev (1974) replied to criticisms, appended to the same paper. Despite following up with yet another article about the relict hominoid hypothesis (Bayanov and Bourtsev, 1976), Bayanov has pointed out:

> To my knowledge, that was the last top penetration by the revolutionary science of hominology into the academic domain of normal anthropology. My next contact with *Current Anthropology* happened many years later in 2002, when I offered the journals new Editor… an article for publication. His reply was polite but firm: 'I appreciate your interest in the journal. However, your manuscript does not fit the scope of the journal, therefore I am unable to accept it for publication'. (Bayanov, 2019: 64)

Myra Shackley

Nevertheless, in 1982 the archaeologist Myra Shackley introduced the idea of relict hominoids to bewildered classicists in the prestigious journal *Antiquity*. Shackley's paper titled "The Case for Neanderthal Survival: Fact, Fiction or Fraction" understandably caused controversy to the extent the editor of the journal added an explanatory note (explaining the decision to publish):

> What, you may say, is *Antiquity* doing giving valuable space to a discussion of wild men in Outer Mongolia? Is it to be the Abominable Snowman in the Christmas issue? But joking apart we think that Dr Myra Shackley, Lecturer in Archaeological Science, University of Leicester, deserves a hearing… she here puts forward the conflicting arguments for the continuing existence of a pocket of Neanderthaloid man.

[6] John Green and Boris Porshnev were both members of the short-lived International Committee for the Study of the Human-like Hairy Bipeds (founded in 1962) and so were familiar with each other's research; another member of the same committee, Ivan T. Sanderson (one of the pioneers of cryptozoology) was aware of Porshnev's work.

[7] See Strasenburgh (1975) and Bayanov and Bourtsev (1976: 312). Despite publishing in *Current Anthropology* and being a member of the AAAS, Gordon Strasenburgh (who died in 2018) wasn't a professional anthropologist.

Shackley's paper while focusing on recent alleged sightings of the Almas (a hairy human-like creature) across Central Asia, mentions Porshnev's interest in folklore and Greek mythology (Shackley, 1982: 39). Porshnev (1968) first suggested Neanderthals survived in ancient Greece and were the basis of hairy bipedal creatures in Greek mythology, including satyrs and silens.[8] The fantastical or magical attributes of these mythical beings he argued was the result of myths being distorted by word of mouth, when retold: "hairy wild men[9] have gradually been endowed with imaginary traits or functions and have become mythified" (Porshnev, 1968 [2017]: 114).

Satyrs as Neanderthals?

Porshnev's far-fetched theory satyrs were mythified relict Neanderthals was developed by his two colleagues (Bayanov and Bourtsev, 1974, 1976). An obvious objection to identifying satyrs with Neanderthals is the former have equine features, however, the earliest depiction of a satyr in Greek artwork, doesn't have equine ears, legs or a tail (Isler-Kerényi, 2004: 9; see fig. 1), quite unlike the (horse-like) depictions of satyrs from the 6th century BCE (Isler-Kerényi, 2004: 17, 21, 35; see figs. 2, 3, 4) and much later goat-like depictions of fauns by Romans. Over time, equine features appear to have been added to an original manlike satyr, supporting Porshnev's idea. Jane Harrison (1908: 381-386) in her book *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (cited by Nash, 1984: 275) makes a similar argument for origin of the centaur in Greek myth:

> Greek art first represented the centaur as a human with an animal adjunct attached to his rear, and only later represented him in his more popular, equine-fore legged form, Harrison proposed that what was originally a shaggy wild man 'became more and more of a horse' evolving by stages into the more popular form of the centaur… 'what was originally a primitive man develops (gradually, due to the malign imagination of others) into a mythological horse-demon'.

[8] Silens (named after Silenus, companion of Dionysus) were thought by ancient Greeks to be elderly satyrs (Paus. 1. 23. 5) and more or less are considered the same by classicists; in art, silens look like old satyrs with bald heads.

[9] Shackley (1983: 24) notes the medieval wild man is a "continuation of classical satyr mythology".

Figure 1. Proto-Corinthian style vessel, c. 650 BCE.

Figure 2. Fragment of ancient Greek pottery, c. 570 BCE.

Figure 3. Volute-krater (shaped by Ergotimos and decorated by Kleitias), c. 565 BCE.

Figure 4. Ancient Greek amphora, c. 560 BCE.

The reluctance of classicists to take seriously the relict hominoid hypothesis is because there are parsimonious theories for satyrs and silens in Greek mythology. For example, satyrs, if not completely imaginary (Seaford, 2016) might have originated with shunned people from society such as hermits or outlaws, dwelling in forests and mountains. This idea remains plausible for the wild man in medieval imagery (Bernheimer, 1952: 16; Harlan-Haughey, 2016: 5). Outlaws (e.g. thieves) and hermits would have had an unkempt physical appearance quite different than townsfolk; overtime, they could have become exaggerated in tales as hairy. However, the relict hominoid hypothesis points to not just hairiness[10] of satyrs in classical artwork, but a few other Neanderthaloid features; these arguably deserve "serious consideration" (Shackley, 1982: 39).

Neanderthals had heavy brow-ridges and broad noses; these robust features are sometimes seen in classical artwork that depict satyrs and silens (Bayanov and Bourtsev, 1976: 315, see figs. 5, 6, 7). The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was likened physically to satyrs and silens for having wide nostrils and hairy shoulders (Xen. *Sym*. 4. 19, 5. 6; Plat. *Sym*. 215b; *Theaet*. 143e; Jer. *Ag*. *Jov*. 1. 48). Erect penises show up on satyrs in classical artwork and this might seem incongruent with the relict hominoid hypothesis, however, this sexual interpretation has been questioned on the basis erect penises don't make sense in scenes that depict satyrs in friendly circumstances and situations of rest (Loofs-Wissowa, 1994: 353). Porshnev (1968 [2017]: 114) thought that sexualised art of satyrs was symbolic of their fondness of wine, i.e. drunkenness.

Against the view satyrs were entirely figment of ancient Greek imagination, proponents of the relict hominoid hypothesis have relied on ancient literary sources that mention capture of live satyrs and/or silens throughout classical antiquity (Porshnev, 1968 [2017]: 121; Bayanov and Bourtsev, 1976: 314; Bayanov, 2012: 25-26). In 83 BCE, a live satyr was allegedly captured by Roman troops in Apollonia, Illyria and exhibited in Rome (Plut. *Sull*. 27. 2) while physical

[10] It's almost certain Neanderthals had abundant body hair for thermoregulation since they were cold adapted.

remains of satyrs (including the skins of silens) were similar tourist attractions (Hdt. 7. 26. 3). According to the classical folklorist Adrienne Mayor, both live and dead exhibits of satyrs were hoaxes; the former consisted of masked stage performers to create the illusion of a satyr, while (human) corpses were fitted with an animal tail (Mayor, 2011: 237). She argues convincingly the latter exhibits were animal composites, although it would have been harder to fake a living satyr. Arguably what was captured in 83 BCE was something real; not a hoax but misidentified.

A possible explanation for ancient live satyr exhibits is monkeys (or apes). This idea isn't new; at the end of the 17th century, an anatomist named Edward Tyson wrote an essay arguing satyrs were misidentified monkeys. At least one classical source appears to identify an encounter with satyrs off the coast of northwest Africa with Barbary macaques (Paus. 1. 23. 5), but it's unlikely monkeys explain every ancient live satyr exhibit since there were graves of silens (Paus. 6. 24. 8; Bayanov, 2012: 25) and monkeys weren't likely to have ever been buried. Shackley (1982: 39) keeps an open mind about the identity of "woodland people" (satyrs) of classical literature but acknowledges the problem of mythology and historical records without physical evidence.

Reviewing Shackley's (1982) article, one folklorist points out relict hominoids would only be able to survive if they had a "a remote region to maintain a breeding population" (Walls, 1984). These refugia of Neanderthals could have existed in peripheral areas (such as at Gibraltar) until 30,000 years ago based on controversially dated Neanderthal artefacts (Finlayson *et al*. 2008), but incontrovertibly no more recent physical evidence exists of Neanderthals. The absence of Neanderthal skeletons and artefacts throughout later prehistory and recorded history explains why the relict hominoid hypothesis is untenable. Furthermore, Shackley (1983: 21) in her book on hominology *Still Living?* became more sceptical of Porshnev's theory of satyrs and silens:

> Porshnev theory, which saw satyrs, fauns, *sileni*… as different ways of depicting surviving hominids, seems to receive no support from classical art or literature.

Figure 5. Phoenician bowl, c. 600 BCE.

Figure 6. Figure of Silenus, 4th century BCE?

Figure 7. Satyr Marsyas and Athena, c. 430 BCE.

Pseudo-Neanderthals

Based on the available paleoanthropological evidence, Neanderthal extinction occurred around 40,000 years ago (with possibility of isolated pockets of Neanderthals surviving ~30,000 cal. BP). However, before going extinct as a population, Neanderthals (sporadically) interbred with *H. s. s.,* and the percentage of Neanderthal DNA in living humans is ~1-2%[11] (Sankararaman *et al*., 2016). One study that analysed the percentage of Neanderthal DNA in Upper Palaeolithic *H. s. s* fossils from Europe found the proportion decreased over a 40,000-year period, from 3-6% to 2% (Fu *et al*. 2016). It's estimated *H. s. s.* living sometime between 50,000-80,000 years ago had an even higher proportion of Neanderthal DNA, about 10% (Harris and Nielson, 2017).

The reason why *H. s. s.* have decreased in terms of Neanderthal DNA is unresolved but might be explained by admixture with populations that contained less Neanderthal DNA or purifying selection. It is important to recognise the aforementioned estimates of Neanderthal DNA in *H. s. s.* are group averages and individuals may have lower or higher Neanderthal DNA, including atypical outliers. As an example, one Upper Palaeolithic *H. s. s.* fossil from Europe has 8-11% Neanderthal DNA (Fu *et al*. 2015) and a minority of living humans have ~5% (Fallows, 2012). Throughout ancient times and perhaps continuing into Middle Ages, it's reasonable to estimate there were unusual human individuals with more than 5% (but under 10%) Neanderthal DNA.

Certain individuals in ancient Greece with higher percentages of Neanderthal DNA (than the average) might have had some Neanderthaloid physical features, e.g. heavy brow-ridges, broad noses and abundant body hair. Contribution of Neanderthal DNA to phenotypic variation in *H. s. s.* however remains poorly understood. Socrates had the following Neanderthaloid features:

[11] Sankararaman *et al*. (2016) analysed the proportion of Neanderthal DNA in 120 different ethnic groups across continents, excluding Africa; all the groups have a ~1-2% (mean) percentage of Neanderthal DNA with Papuans carrying the highest. African ethnic groups, however, have a lower proportion of Neanderthal DNA (under ~1%).

wide nostrils, hairy shoulders, bulging or large eyes (Xen. *Sym*. 5. 5) and bowlegs (Jer. *Ag*. *Jov*. 1. 48). A final thought, the fact satyrs are described in classical literature as dwelling in forests is perhaps analogous to lepers during the Middle Ages who often took refuge in woods because "Where else could they go?" (Harrison, 1992: 61). In other words, the abnormal appearance of pseudo-Neanderthals often forced these individuals to live on the edges of society, even outside of it. While Socrates chose to remain in a city, he was an outcast for his odd physical features.

Conclusion

So-called "pseudo-Neanderthal"[12] individuals plausibly explain satyrs in Greek mythology, the wild man in medieval imagery, as well as provide a solution to ancient live satyr exhibits (that weren't monkeys) and graves of silens. It's tempting to argue pseudo-Neanderthals also explain hairy manlike cryptids (e.g. sasquatch, almas) but a discussion falls outside scope of this paper.

[12] This term is defined by Boule and Vallois (1957: 257) as *H. s. s.* with some Neanderthaloid physical features, although as cautioned by the paleoanthropologists Trinkaus and Shipman (1992: 412): "Rare individuals among modern humans may share one, or even a few, of the anatomical characteristics of Neandertals, but not one human - much less any population - can be found that possesses the entire constellation of traits that define Neandertals".

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